



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview May 13, 2017

Gomez, Maria ~ Oral History Interview

Corinn Williams

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New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center
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P.O. Box 2052
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Background

Name of person interviewed: Maria Gomez

Facts about this person:

Age 28

Sex Female

Occupation

Fish skinning machine operator

Residence (Town where lives)

New Bedford

Ethnic background (if known)

Guatemala, Maya K'iche

Interviewer: Corinn Williams

Transcriber: Joselyn Feliciano

Interview location: Community Economic Development Center, New Bedford

Date of interview: January 21, 2017

Key Words: Skinning machine, packing, fish cutters, fillets, Immigration, Guatemala, New Bedford, America

Abstract

Maria Gomez is from Guatemala and skins, cleans and packs fish at Bergie's Seafood in New Bedford, MA. She describes her job cleaning and cutting fish at Bergie's, job positions for men and women in the fish processing industry, her family life and move from Guatemala to the United States.

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[2:25] Left home country Guatemala to U.S. because of failing economy, mother's illness, family in US and Guatemala.

[6:35] Father's illness upon return to Guatemala. Job at Bergie's Seafood, skinning machine job description, ethnic diversity in company, training as a team, job descriptions, company uniforms and gear.

[12:17] Machine operation, packing, communication standards between employees

[16:00] Schedule, fluctuating hours based off-season

[20:18] Diversity in the workplace, contrast between male and female job descriptions, equality, safety standards, training

[25:30] Fish cutters, company growth, machine operation, and family, economic struggle

[37:17] End interview

Light Transcription

(2:25) My name is Maria Gomez and I am from Sam Andres Sacabaja de Quiche, Guatemala. I am 28 years old. I came here 16 years ago July 22. I was 15 years old and I came here with my father. He is not here anymore. He returned to Guatemala. I didn't do anything in Guatemala. There is no work, I came here out of need, so I can eat. Only men can get work over there two or three days picking vegetables. My mother would make tortillas and clean the house. She became sick and died in 1999 and two weeks later I came here. I have one sibling in Guatemala and two here.

(6:35) I came here with my father, he was living here for a few years. He was diagnosed with diabetes when he was here (in the U.S.) and when he returned (to Guatemala) he drank a lot and passed away. I am here with my husband with no children but I am four months pregnant now.

I stopped going to school when my mother became ill, it was very difficult. When I was 15 and I arrived in the U.S. everything was nice. I was able to rest for a couple of weeks and shortly after I found a job but soon after that there was a lay off. Looking for work became difficult, I only worked a day or two or three day here and there. Then I went to the south end and found a job and I have been there for 15 years. I have stayed because they always offer hours to work.

I work cleaning fish on a table of fifteen women. There are many different people from different countries. My aunt worked at the factory and she showed me how to clean the fish along with the help of the supervisors. I speak Spanish and Quiche but I have learned more Spanish at work. (At first) I was just putting labels on the bags for the scallops. I work on the skinning machine, cleaning fish, packing fish, doing everything.

(12:17) The cutters cut the fish creating fillets, a man comes and put the fish with scales on the tables and I separate the skin from the fish and put the skin in a tub. When we clean fish we are eight people and it usually it is just me and sometimes another person who skins the fish. You have to put on gloves and jacket so you don't dirty your clothes. In the wintertime, we have to wear thick clothes because of the cold, but during the summer it is normal. If the machine locks up or gets ruined someone has to come and fix it, which happens about once a week. The women just clean the fish if they are still dirty after I pass them through the machine. Before I used to weigh the fish. The women pack the fish I would weigh the fish for ten pounds and I would mark the packages with the names of the fish. After that, I went to skinning fish. I have learned various skills. I like to be there because the boss a good person, they don't hurt or disrespect. There are bosses in some jobs that yell and put you down.

(16:00) At Kyler Seafoods they yelled at us to hurry up. If we missed a day, they would yell at us that we needed to get permission to take days off. Here at Bergie's they are calm. The most difficult part is when there are a lot of fish it is hard because we get tired. We go in early and leave late and we get tired. Normally we enter at 7 AM and leave at 5 PM but when there is a lot of fish we start at 4 AM and work for 13-14 hours a day, but that is only when we get a lot of fish and that will be like for two or three weeks and it goes back to normal. Work decreases in

January and goes up in March a little bit. Before Holy Week work increases because everyone is eating seafood, but the work usually goes up and down. I got this job because a friend told me they were looking for people to work, and he urged me to go where he works because there is a need for workers so I got the job. My husband also works at this company. It is good because we go to work together and get out at the same time and at home and we get eat lunch and dinner together. He cuts fish, he is a fish cutter. I don't have many friends at work we just say and hi and things like that.

(20:18) Sometimes we speak in K'iche dialect in Spanish, and a little bit of English. At least half the people are from San Andres and other parts of Quiche. There are men and women working there. The women clean and pack the fish while the men cut the fish, creating fillets. Other men put fish on the table for the women, lifting 25 lbs boxes. They treat everyone equally and with respect. There are other companies that mistreat employees. I don't think it is dangerous but maybe in other companies where they have big machines. When someone comes in and doesn't know the job, the rest of us get together to teach and the supervisors help too and in two weeks they understand (how to do the job).

(25:37) Sometimes people leave to take other jobs. Not understanding English can be an issue. There have been some changes, now there are machines that cut the codfish frozen. Before it was the men cutting them. The company has purchased machines to skin the fish but they didn't used to have machines to take the bones out or to cut fillets and now they do. Before there were 9 fish cutters by hand and they worked a lot of hours and when the company bought the machines, the fish cutters all left to find another job and now there are only fish two cutters. It went from nine cutters fulltime to five cutters with a few hours and now just two. Cutting fish takes a lot of practice, you have to cut good and understand how to take the bones out.

Well, I would like to tell the new immigrants they must work hard to earn money to buy what they want. The sister of my husband has been here for a year now. She is 17 years old. It has been difficult because she can't work, she has to go to school. When she turns 18 she will leave school and go to work, she says she doesn't like to study she would prefer to work.

(30:00) My sister-in-law came because she heard we have money here, she was looking for a dream. She thought when she got here she could just work but the law says she has to go to school. It is difficult because we have to support her with food, clothing and rent. When I came here from Guatemala I was just a baby. I didn't know my husband from Guatemala, I met him here at work. He came to the U.S with his sister, together with their father. The father has a hard time because of his immigration appointments. The four of us live here, the three of us work and we pay for the food together and we share the expenses. We pay 500.00, it is a little but the apartment is very small. We pay for light, gas, cable and telephone. It is a little better because his father helps with the rent., we pay 250.00 each plus the other bills before so it is better now. I would like to save money if I could, maybe one day. We don't know if someday we will go back to Guatemala so if maybe we save money we will have when we are over there. We would like to stay here, get settled and buy a nice car. That is my dream and god only knows.

(37:17) End of recording.